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The Schorr Controversy

Press Group: Helping Hand Bruised

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The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press was in the process of launching a \$2 million fundraising campaign when a not-so-funny thing happened on the way to financial security.

CBS reporter Daniel Schorr, possessor of the much-reported but still "secret" congressional intelligence report, called in with a proposal.

Schorr was looking for a publisher to put the report out, since the House had voted to keep it a secret. That publisher, the reasoning went, would make money, and the profession — rather than any individual newsman — ought to share in it. Would the committee, a private group run by and for reporters, care to share in the proceeds if any turned up?

IT SEEMED a reasonable idea to the members of the group's executive committee, all working Washington reporters, when they were contacted after the proposal was received. Schorr also was given the name of a lawyer he might find helpful in his activities involving the report.

The latter action seemed little more than the main business of the committee, helping reporters in trouble with the law because of their pursuit of information in their constitutionally protected profession.

But it was more than business as usual, and the distinction may have severe implications for the reporters' group.

The controversy, that arose following publication of the House report in the Village Voice, has made Schorr the target of a congressional investigation, and it has left the committee a changed institution with serious questions being asked within the profession about its conduct and its future.

Those who are running the organization, however, seem determined that it will not be caught like this again.

AFTER DAYS of meetings and a "no-comment" silence, the committee yesterday declared that the publisher of the Voice, Clay Felker, did not offer any money, nor would any be accepted by the committee if he did.

The statement said the committee agreed to accept proceeds because the offer met its conditions: That no obligation to the donor be incurred and that the donor agree that his or her identity and the amount of the gift be disclosed.

"At no time did the committee have possession of the Pike Committee report or access to it, and no one on the reporters committee has ever known the identity of Mr. Schorr's source for the document," read the statement.

Although there were no conditions attached to the anticipated contribution, and the only action of the committee was to put Schorr in touch with a lawyer, the committee said, any offer of money would be rejected to avoid any appearance of a quid pro quo.

THAT STATEMENT masked divisions on the committee over whether its actions were appropriate, and what should be done now.

"There's a difference of opinion over whether we showed poor judgment," says Jack Nelson, executive committee member and Los Angeles Times Washington bureau chief. "I don't think we did. I think what we did was perfectly proper."

Another executive committee member, Lyle Denniston of The Washington Star, says his feeling is that "we made a serious mistake in taking part in the process of getting the report into print."

Newhouse News Service's Jack Landau, also a member of the executive committee, said that "most people think that going further than the purely defensive role is what caused the problem."

"The lawyer was serving a dual role and that's the problem. He was helping Dan find a publisher and giving some legal advice on liability and how the thing should be done," Landau said. "The guy is familiar with publishing, and it's the normal thing to do." The lawyer was not identified.

THE COMMITTEE declares flatly in its statement that it had nothing to do with the final arrangements for publication.

The statement makes no mention of any thought that the committee overstepped its charter in becoming involved in Schorr's project when it did. There are indications that concern for the legal consequences, among them possible loss of tax-exempt status, prompted its status could doom the committee.

A desire not to add to Schorr's troubles with the government, as well as concern for the committee's future, has also played a part in shaping the committee's public comments. "It's a compromise and I don't call it anything else," says Denniston.

The committee was launched in 1970 by working journalists following a number of judicial orders for reporters' testimony. It has never experienced complete financial health. Nelson says the budget has worked up to about \$60,000 a year, but he adds that the committee "has very little money now."

THE \$2 MILLION fundraising drive to establish an endowment is headed by Arthur Taylor, the president of CBS, which has promised to support Schorr's protection of his source, but which has also suspended him from reporter duties while he is under government investigation.

The fund raising has yet to start in earnest. "It's just kind of dragged along," says Landau. "We haven't sent out the first mailer yet."

Will the controversy and criticism hurt the effort? Landau doesn't think so. Others aren't so optimistic.

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